

# ABHINAVAGUPTA

An introduction  
to the leading exponent of  
Kashmir Shaivism

by  
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Abhinavagupta was born into a lineage of Shaiva scholars in Kashmir sometime between A.D. 950 and 960.\* Two centuries earlier Abhinavagupta's ancestors had been the chief formulators of the Tantric philosophy that served as the basis of Kashmir Shaivism. Abhinava spent his youth studying with the leading spiritual teachers of his time in and about Kashmir. He mastered all the schools of Kashmir Shaivism (Krama, Kula, Trika, Spanda, and Pratyabhijna), as well as

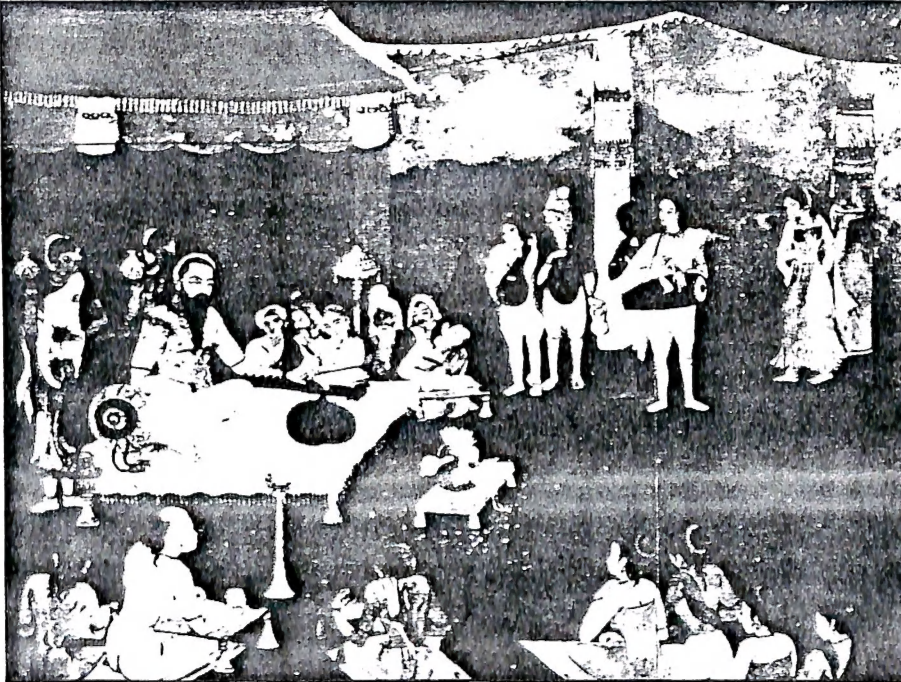
Jainism and Vijnanavada Buddhism. Possessed of a powerful intellect, he was also a master of grammar, poetry, rhetoric, and the six traditional systems of Hindu philosophy (the *shad darshanas*).

Abhinavagupta was the foremost exponent of Kashmir Shaivism. In addition to teaching and serving as spiritual head of the Shaivite schools at that time, Abhinavagupta wrote voluminously on the Kashmir Shaivite philosophy. He is the author of forty-four known works on the subjects of Kashmir Shaivism,

poetry, and aesthetics, and references within his writings indicate that he composed many more, which have since been lost. His most comprehensive work, the *Tantraloka*, is a synthesis of all the schools of Kashmir Shaivism. In it he outlines the mystical, ritual, and philosophical tenets of Shaivism.

The philosophy which Abhinavagupta both embraced and further espoused centers on the idea of unity in duality. Absolute Reality, in Abhinavagupta's thought, is essentially One. He writes of it as *anuttara*, an inexpressible, unreactable immensity. It is complete and undivided, blissful and calm, incomprehensibly simple.

While it may be immutable, Reality for Abhinavagupta is most emphatically not passive. It is a vibrant force which flows through us in all states – waking, dreaming-sleep and deep unconsciousness. It is *spanda*, or sound-vibration, and the world we live in results from the intersecting waves that reverberate from this vibration. Rather than a static consciousness divorced from the activity of the phenomenal realm, which realm is then viewed as an illusion, Abhinavagupta and Kashmir Shaivism posit a unitary reality that contains all the diversity of existence within itself. It is Shiva-Shakti, passive consciousness and creative activity, encompassing and extending beyond the universe. The physical world, for Abhinavagupta, is an extension of the creative aspect of the underlying reality. It is *abhasa* (reflection or manifestation), rather than *maya* (illusion or error). ■



A "faithful representation" of drawing by a disciple at Abhinavagupta's "recognition" (as head of all Shaiva sects) celebration. From Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*.

\* Most of the factual information about Abhinavagupta's life and teaching is taken from K.C. Pandey's *Abhinavagupta: An Historical and Philosophical Study*, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 1963.



# Abhinavagupta

## THE ROLE OF GRACE

In the following excerpt from her "Techniques of Transmission in Kashmir Shaivism,"\* Lilian Silburn explains the role of grace in the teacher/student relationship as Abhinavagupta set it forth in his *Tantraloka*. Silburn is a leading Kashmir Shaivite scholar.

The image of the dancing Shiva represents Shiva as the source of all movement within the universe: creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment, and release; its purpose is to release the souls of men from illusion. The place of the dance is said to be within the heart.



Of all the Indian philosophical systems, the monistic system of Kashmir most thoroughly and profoundly explains the various influences of the spiritual master. Even before the seventh century several mystical traditions flourished in Kashmir – Trika, Kula, Krama, etc. – each possessing

\* Excerpted from an article originally published as "Techniques de la transmission mystique dans le Shivaïsme du Cachemire," *Hermes* 4 (1966-67): 158–175. Translated into English by members of the Nityananda Institute. Reprinted with permission of *Hermes*.



lineage of venerated masters (*pradaya*). Abhinavagupta, who lived in the late tenth century, had as gurus the greatest masters of his age, and was initiated by them in these different traditions. Thus did Shambhunatha, who had restored the Kula system, reveal the Self to him and teach him the practices of initiation.

Abhinavagupta commented upon certain treatises and descriptions of these systems. The compendium of these teachings is to be found in his voluminous *Tantraloka* (The Light of Tantra), concerned with paths of liberation and composed in Sanskrit verses.

The materials that have served in the preparation of this article have been taken from the *Tantraloka*; they thus form a part of the teaching of Abhinavagupta, himself a famous master with numerous disciples.

## The Role of Grace

The relationship between teacher and disciple can only be understood if we are sensitive to the nature of this relationship. Abhinavagupta perceived two classes of humanity: those who are touched by grace and all others. The issue of teacher and disciple only arises for the former and then, as a function of grace: "The supreme Ruler who forever projects the world in his own energy, is grace; he emanates the world and reabsorbs it. He is supremely free." (*Trikanridaya*)

According to this monistic system, Shiva, by his impetuous, free play, first veils his true nature by dissimulating himself in his energy's ever-renewed forms, and from his own freedom becomes limited and enslaved. With equal freedom it is he who dispenses his grace and reveals himself in his true essence. Whether he mystifies or bestows his grace, Shiva's essential nature is nothing but grace. He is the only master, universal Consciousness, the absolute I. His supreme energy—Grace—is perpetually awake in all conscious subjects and constitutes the true relationship between teacher and disciple.

It is the same Consciousness which poses questions in the form of the disciple and responds to them as teacher. As the former, he is imperfect and unclear consciousness, full of doubts and uncertainties (*vikalpa*). As the latter, he is intense and lucid, bringing an end to all doubts. (*Tantraloka* I, 233 and 253 sl.) The appearance of teacher and disciple in two different bodies, being a

construction of the imagination, disappears when the single, same Knowledge of liberation illuminates the one and the other.

It matters little that the lineage of teachers stretches infinitely in time, for the Guru is one; when he liberates his disciple, it is in truth himself that he liberates. (235)

Shiva, the first guru, assumes the form of many masters, divinities, sages, supermen and men alike; to each corresponds a disciple from the category immediately below. Thus Shiva's disciple is Sadashiva, barely distinct from himself, and at the other end of the scale are the teacher and his disciple, both human beings. But everywhere and always, the supreme relationship must be regained at each level: even if the guru is a man, he must be considered to be Shiva and oneself, Sadashiva. (I, 273)

In this relationship, grace is critical because it permeates a human being and transforms him into a teacher, determining as well various techniques of mystical transmission. The term *guru* signifies "heavy." It is used because the weight of grace draws out the disciple's important and enduring qualities. Without grace, there is no genuine guru. One Tantra declares that if Shiva does not grant his grace, the guru in spite of all his efforts cannot instruct the disciple and, even if he could, the disciple would lack vigilance and would not retain that which he had received; or, if he did retain it, that he would lose its benefits by becoming attached to fleeting joys which would consequently halt his progress.

Shiva bestows or withholds his grace without regard to the merits or faults of men nor to their knowledge or ignorance. It may be objected that some make efforts to purify themselves or to show themselves worthy, but in fact the desire to purify oneself is already a sign of grace.

Although the Essence is one, it is called Grace inasmuch as it is gratuitous, a living force which incites the heart and spirit, causing vibrations of sound, light, and the like. It is also designated by the name *pratibha*, spontaneous illumination. This term is essential to Trika, and emphasizes grace's radiation, the brusque awakening of divine power which lies dormant within the human heart. In reality every conscious being is eternally immersed in this beneficent energy, but he hoards it up and utilizes it for profit; in so doing he separates it from its source and deprives it of its efficiency, limiting it, isolating it, orienting

it towards the external, subjugating it to particular desires and feelings. The single energy disperses itself into multiple energies, the cosmic body into distinct bodies, the supreme vibration (*spanda*) into limited movements, and life (*prana*) into vital breaths. Thus the energy of the Self, infinite and undifferentiated—Absolute I—appears fragmented and dependent.

But as a human being is never really separate from his true essence (which consists of grace), he can regain consciousness of the Self and recover his original liberty. To bring this about, his dissociated energies must join at their center, the heart. The guru's duty is to encourage this return to the source by instilling himself in his disciples through various procedures: he joins his breath with theirs, awakening the forces which lie dormant in them and allowing them to rejoin the undifferentiated breath which returns them to the total life. The guru may permeate a disciple's heart, inciting vibrations of the universal heart; or, merging consciousness with consciousness, he may render his disciple capable of recognizing the Self. Such are three aspects of the return to unity: merging the breaths, awakening the life force (*kundalini*), and illumination.

## The Masters

One can enter grace in three ways: 1) by one's self, without intermediary, when it is awakened spontaneously (this process is denoted by the term *pratibhijñanin*, the gnostic, master by illumination); 2) through the intermediary of scriptures, wherein a man takes from the scriptures a formula which guides him to liberation; and 3) with the help of a teacher.

Among the masters themselves, we can distinguish the initiate—trained by one or many masters—from the *pratibhoguru* who has received illumination without intermediary. But insofar as the disciple is concerned, each may be called *sadguru*, an authentic master.

## Pratibho Guru, The Master Through Illumination

Such a master has experienced an intense grace which, pouring over him, has immediately dissolved his ignorance. He absorbs himself into the divine energy and of his own accord understands the nature of bondage and liberation. He then resolutely attaches himself



supreme essence, losing himself in Shiva and identifying with him. Liberated while alive, his only task "here below" is to deliver others.

This illuminating intuition which acts as an inner teacher springs from the depth of the Self and depends neither on scriptures nor on an "outer" guru. From the start, it must be held onto. One must disregard all other knowledge, just as one extinguishes a lamp when the sun rises. (XIII, 179) In effect, it alone permits the absolute certainty that ends the doubts which are inseparable from duality. Of what importance is it if this *jnanin* has not been initiated in the regulations? He possesses true mastery, having received the initiation from his own inner energies when they all converged effortlessly at their center and plunged into undifferentiated Consciousness. (I-1)

It behooves this eminent master to accept the help of another master or to re-examine the scriptures so that he might become still more perfect and more certain of his own convictions. He is thereafter called truly accomplished because of the fullness of his triple illumination — the spontaneous illumination joined with the illumination born of his scriptural study together with that of his teacher, with whom he finally identifies. In the course of deep *samadhi*, he has first of all diligently exerted himself, joining his guru's wisdom with his own. Following his teacher through a complete range of mystical experiences, he inherits the vast knowledge accumulated over the centuries by a lineage of qualified masters. (IV, 76-77)

But if illumination is instantaneous, how is it that it can also be developed? In fact, illumination's depth and breadth vary indeed, and it does not always occur in precisely the same manner. Sometimes it strikes like a brilliant flash and never returns. Or, initially vacillating, it may become stronger by degrees, with or without the help of a teacher. Sometimes it appears definitively right from the start, making its "possessor" a *pratibho guru*.

Thus all masters do not exercise the same sphere of influence: illumination surges forth in some only enough for their own liberation, it permits others to liberate a small number of disciples, it renders a few rare individuals capable of liberating a multitude of disciples. A universal master liberates all of humanity. One can compare them, respectively, to a glow worm which shines only inwardly for himself, to a jewel, to

a star, to the moon, and to the sun. (XIII, 159 and IV, 139)

One can recognize this *pratibho guru* by specific signs of which the most important is an unshakable devotion to Shiva. Master of the mantras and the powers they contain, he also dominates the elements, finds success in all his enterprises, possesses a poetic gift, and understands all the scriptures.

These various powers surge forth when intuitive discrimination reveals itself. His organs and his thoughts purified (and thus perfectly conscious), he can hear and see at a distance. But he ought not to use these powers except to encourage faith and certitude in his disciples. In this way he will inspire in them the confidence that will aid in their liberation. (XIII, 183)

### The Authentic Teacher: *Sadguru*

The teacher deserving of this name should have perfect Self-knowledge (*atman*), and should be identified with Shiva. Abhinavagupta defines such a teacher beautifully when he describes him as having "ardent vigilance."

Indifferent to the opinion of others, he shuns all ostentatiousness, unlike the hypocrite who presents himself as an illuminated master all the while lacking knowledge of the Self. And the deluding energy of which the hypocrite is victim is produced, like grace, independent of merit or fault. In this, Shiva, through his freedom, totally dissimulates his own nature and ridicules his proper role; he could not go further in this play! An awakened being, because of his free consciousness, may comport himself publicly like an ignoramus since he scoffs at social convention. Likewise, an ignoramus under the influence of divine energy may act like a guru in a most serious manner. (XIV, 6-8)

Further, it is necessary to distinguish carefully the true guru from *jnanins* and *yogins* who have not overcome tendencies toward duality and for this reason do not constitute true masters. There exist gnostics filled with knowledge but lacking in mystical experience, and there are yoga technicians skilled in experience but without knowledge. According to the Kashmir Shaivites, *yogins* and *jnanins* are roughly divided into four groups: to the first group belongs the theologian who is concerned only with theory and can teach the revealed texts which he has studied and understood. Similarly, the *yogin* initiated in yoga de-

votes himself to various practices. From the second group arises the gnostic who has a living experience of the treatises, having understood them in their deepest sense through intuitive discrimination (*cinta*). Since his well-exercised intuition permits him to know the Self, he becomes a zealous yogi who pursues the yogic path with ardor and dedicates his life to it.

But only the gnostic of the third group is a true master, for he possesses the complete mystical experience which at its summit rejoins unwavering illumination, the essential knowledge of the divine. Even if he has not read the treatises, he knows them instinctually. He is, furthermore, a master in *samadhi*, from which derives his name, *siddhayogin*, "the accomplished yogin." Though he has rejected all duality, he retains enough awareness of the distinction between guru and *sishtya* to accomplish his work of liberation. From this order arises a potent master capable of giving numerous disciples knowledge of the Self as well as supernatural yogic powers. Abhinavagupta is perhaps the finest example of such a master.

There exists still another group of *yogins* and *jnanins*, by nature very perfect (*susiddha*). Since they live in undifferentiated *samadhi* without interruption, for them everything is absolute fullness. They perceive neither bondage nor liberation and cannot, consequently, assume responsibility for disciples. (XIII, 328)

A scripture defines the guru's fundamental task: "O Beloved," declares Shiva to the Goddess, "he who, from the scriptures or from the master's words discovers what water and ice are, has no further tasks to accomplish; this birth will be his last." The guru, in melting the heart of the disciple, returns to their fluid state the parcelled and hard ice blocks of his thoughts. The disciple in confidence allows himself to be carried by the waters of undifferentiated life, following the guru's and Shiva's subtle instigations. On his part, both confidence and surrender are indispensable. He cannot participate in mystical knowledge and in the guru's power if he does not absorb himself totally in the guru. This surrender leads first to identification with the master, then with Shiva. By the grace of the Self, one's artificial personality is utterly destroyed. Nevertheless, the disciple does not become a slave; he obeys only that which is his essential nature and discovers freedom in the very heart of his most complete surrender. ■